

## **ORGANIZING SMALL FARMERS TO EXPLOIT MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES**

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### Introduction

- I live in Uniontown, Alabama, which is a small rural county located in what is known as the “Blackbelt.” This county is named as such for its heavy black clay Soils.
- In the 60’s and 70’s we used these soils to grow many farm crops and especially okra. Many families grew small acreages of okra and sold it to a local canning plant called King Pharr. This process provided supplementary income for small landowners as producers and plant employees.
- As time progressed, this plant closed and the small landowners lost their market and the farmers stopped farming produce as such.
- Our RC&D Council in 1996 took the initiative to look at this situation and interact trying to assist smaller farmers to become diversified and perhaps vertically integrated.
  - ✓ If they diversify their marketing, opportunities increased.
  - ✓ If they become Vertically Integrated, they can control the production, processing, and marketing, and thereby control the destiny of their operations.
- This was a new venture for our council so we developed partnerships with small farmers, community groups, state agencies, USDA and private foundations.
- As a result we have put together small farm cooperative in an effort to stabilize small farmers.
- Created a Distribution Network called Down South Food.
- This network serves as a distributing network for the following products produced by small farmers.
  - ✓ Pork
  - ✓ Beef
  - ✓ Goats
  - ✓ Rabbits
  - ✓ Vegetable Products

### What Have We Learned?

As a council, we found out that this is a huge undertaking and it is going to take a lot of time, effort, and money to organize small farmers so that they can exploit marketing opportunities.

### Therefore We Need To:

1. Continue to work as a council to organize small farmers.
2. Seek funding to jump start new farming groups.
3. Develop opportunities from the private sector to ensure that small farm cooperatives distribution networks and processing units become self-sustainable.

### Summary

- Small farmers play a great part in the development of our county.
- Some of our best citizens grew up on small farms that were in production.
- We need to restore our small family farms and utilize the energy of youth in the production of food and fiber.
- I remember growing up on my grandfather's farm and the control I had over the farm animals. This gave me my leadership role as –
  - A consumer
  - A businessman
  - County Commissioner
  - And the list goes on and on
- I think that RC&D Councils across this nation can facilitate a process in collaboration with other partnerships to save the culture of small farmers.

Thank you very much